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JANUARY 21, 1830—JANUARY 21, 1923

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"NINETY-THREE YEARS OF SERVICE —IN RECOGNITION OF THE MAKERS OF OUR CHURCH INHERITANCE"

A SERMON

BY

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PULPIT
FIRST UNITARIAN CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH OF CINCINNATI

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"That the generation to come might know them, even the children which should be born, who should arise and tell them to their children."

ON this day, which marks ninety-three years since this church came into being, officially, by the granting of its Charter, we wish to gather up a part of the story for those who come after.

Measured by the long time which made this valley and clothed its hills, it has not been very long since the first settlers came here, but, it is long ago enough for most that happened to be lost and for most that remains to be left unread and to be forgotten.

About one hundred years before this church was founded, the emblem of the Catholic Church was here, and almost one hundred and fifty years before, in 1682, only sixty-two years after the Pilgrims came to Plymouth, the French had missions along this valley. But the immediate background which con-

cerns us most is the period of forty years preceding 1830.

First, let us put ourselves in their place and get the historical setting of those who lived when this church was first taking form. In 1830 the country had less than thirteen million people. Andrew Jackson was in the second year of his administration, the first President not born and reared in Virginia or Massachusetts. It was the year of the first steam railroad. The Erie Canal had been open five years. Things within their recent memory as clearly as the World War within ours, were the first steamship crossing the Atlantic; the purchase of Florida; the Monroe Doctrine and Lafayette's visit. Webster's Dictionary had been out two years. Daniel Webster and Henry Clay were the great names in the nation. It was three years before Chicago was named, or the first penny newspaper was printed, and four years before the McCormick reaper was invented. The use of coal was just coming to be known. It was the year George the Fourth died and William the Fourth became King. The Battle of Waterloo was only fifteen years back. It was three years before Great Britain suppressed the slave trade, and seven years before the Victorian period began. Irving, Cooper and Bryant were the American writers. The age of Scott, Wordsworth, Byron, Keats and Shelley was just coming to an end, and the age of Tennyson, Browning, Dickens,

Thackeray, George Eliot, Carlyle, and Ruskin was just beginning.

In any part of the country, outside of New England, where a church of this name is found, it is always interesting to find how it came to be there. In New England its presence is easily explained. It is one part of the divided colonial church which was a congregational kind of church. Outside of New England it may be found that those who were active in the settlement of that place came from New England and brought certain religious preferences with them as they did preferences for certain kinds of foods and furniture. One may go into such widely separated churches as those of St. Paul, or Helena, or Denver, or Lawrence (Kansas), or San Francisco, yet in each it will be found that the church is there, and was there early, because some of the first settlers came from New England.

While a considerable part of the population here came over the route opened by Daniel Boone, and a large group came from New York and New Jersey, in neither of which this kind of church was familiar, yet, Ohio, early was known as the "Yankee State," "The New England of the West." We are told that settlers north of the Ohio, the Indian side of the river, formed their institutions after the New England model, and strove to impress the stamp of Puritan ideas on school, church, and government.

There were traces of liberal influence here very early, even before the name Unitarian was taken by American liberals, which was not until 1819 when Channing spoke at Baltimore, which was only eleven years before this church was organized. We are much interested as liberals, in this part of the country, in the first influences here. In 1794, before this church was founded, there was a center of culture and high intellectual interest in Lexington, Kentucky, which was the seat of Transylvania University, one of the first institutions west of the mountains. We note that very early it had one of the largest libraries in the country. In 1794, thirty-six years before this church was here, Rev. Henry Toulmin, an English Unitarian, became President of this College. He was a disciple of Joseph Priestly, an English Unitarian minister, the discoverer of oxygen, who came to America and organized a church in Pennsylvania in 1794. In 1818, twelve years before this church was organized, Rev. Horace Holley, who had been minister of the Hollis Street Unitarian Church in Boston, became President of this institution. In 1827 he resigned because objection was raised to his theological convictions. The Presbyterians withdrew to Center College and left the Methodists in control. After the War the institution was merged into Kentucky University.

In one of the first sermons given in the settlement at Marietta, this liberal sentiment was expressed:

"The sum total of the Gospels is comprehended in love to God and love to men. We ought to allow others the same right of private judgment which we assume to ourselves. There are doubtless persons already here who may be of different sentiments and different denominations. As the settlement advances they will enjoy the privilege of forming societies of their own persuasion. Whatever you may hear which does not correspond with your own opinion, you are not obliged to receive as truth, but, perhaps it may not be amiss to give it a candid examination." This was spoken at Marietta in 1788 in the second sermon preached there.

About the first opportunity afforded in our country for real religious differences of opinion was in this territory. Those who came up from the South came from a teritory in which the English Church always had had legal and social advantage. Those who came from New England were familiar with what had been in fact a state church, which continued its prestige after the legal status was lost. Dissent was not easy. What the Pilgrims came for was in reality first established here in the second lap of the westward course of empire. It was definitely written into the Ordinance of 1787 that no form of religious opinion should have legal advantage, and that what was secured to each by law should be granted by all in social practice.

In 1815 the impression of a visitor here is that the city seems to have been copied after the New England pattern. He finds the same desire for keeping up schools, for cultivating psalmody, for settling ministers and attending on religious worship; but unfortunately, he goes on to say, he finds the same disposition to dogmatize; to settle not only their own faith, but also that of their neighbors, and to stand resolutely for the slightest shade of difference of religious opinion.

As we look back upon it now, it seems that the people were saying to themselves, "We never before have had a chance to go our own way in religion. Now that we can, let us devise something a little different." Dr. W. H. Venable records, "I doubt if the world has witnessed a more extraordinary series of religious events than transpired in the Ohio Valley in the first half of the nineteenth century." We are told that representatives of every creed and propagandists of every "ism" were here, rejoicing in the new freedom to say what they wanted to say. Religious liberty ran riot and the liberty to be against religion, and in no church, was by many equally prized and taken advantage of. Even the old line churches here felt the new ferment. The staid old Baptist and Presbyterian churches had their divisions and heresy trials. Every striking character with a good voice and some new angle of private interpretation of Scripture, went out to im-

press all he could, and he usually could impress a number, and formed a new sect. About this time the camp meeting began, and 20,000 souls, we are told, gathered at the great revival at Cane Ridge, near Paris, Kentucky. There were Lorenzo Dow, Alexander Campbell and Robert Owen, with his project for a new social order. Only five years before this church was organized, he bought the tract of land for the experiment at New Harmony, Indiana. This was the period when people went far, and in crowds, to hear religious debates upon doctrines which do not stir us very much. Just at the time this church was forming, we read of Robert Owen, who denied the truth of religion, debating here with Alexander Campbell, who took the side of Christianity, with visitors from distant states attracted by the subject and the fame of the disputants. For eight days this debate continued here in a building seating twelve hundred, with many turned away. We read of another eight-day debate here between an orthodox minister and a Universalist, before great crowds, with many climbing upon the roof to hear, and of a sixteen-day disputation at Lexington, Kentucky, between Alexander Campbell and a Presbyterian, with Henry Clay presiding.

The years between the settling of the first people here, in 1788, and 1830, when this church was organized, were the very years in which our own church was separating from the Calvinistic, colonial, con-

gregational church of New England. Eleven years before, Channing in his Baltimore Sermon had acknowledged the Unitarian name. That is, at this period we too, with all the rest, were in a transition state and were taking new form. Our church here began about the time that our denomination, if we are such, under our present name, came into being in this country.

A church of this kind in any city outside New England can thank its good fortune if it got started right at the first. Churches of this name in New England came by a process of gradual evolution. Outside of New England, at a definite time, a definite body of people said, "Let us now make a Unitarian Church in this place." Much, all, depends upon, not so much who the people are, as upon what they think they want and what they believe a Unitarian church to be after they get it. There are always two groups and the success of the church depends very largely on which group gives the church its general reputation and tone, at the first, in the community life. One of the myths which we carry along is that back in the 1790's and early 1800's, in fact almost any time before our own, everybody was profoundly religious and an actively loyal churchman. We have the best of witnesses to say that crowds, then, held aloof from religion and that a large number were skeptical and even hostile to every kind of church. William G. Eliot, who went

to St. Louis in 1834, records that those who liked to call themselves infidels welcomed his coming with a flourish, as a recruit to help fight the churches already there. On the first Sundays they crowded in and filled the place, then, as it came out that ours is a church that would be a church of the living God, in spirit and in truth, they saw that this was not what they wished, and dropped out. For three years Dr. Eliot preached to twenty-five or thirty, but, they were the people who wanted what he wanted, a church. In time they made a church of far-reaching influence.

I say a church can thank its good fortune if it gets started right. One can go over the country, outside of New England, and find that the strong churches today are those which were shaped first by those who wanted a better church, and were zealous for a thoughtful and spiritual religion. Likewise, one can find the failures where the church at its foundation, for the sake of a crowd, played into the hands of a group who did not want a church, or religious instruction, or discipline, or worship, or anything like them, but, according to their feeble light, were against all churches and religion itself.

One would have to go far to find three churches more fortunate in their leadership than Cincinnati, Louisville and St. Louis. To this leadership may be attributed this result, that, in each case an honored

and influential institution was planted in the early history of the city. These young men heeded the ancient injunction, "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will show thee."

They had youth's zeal to have part in shaping the new country, and youth's love of change and hazard. Another reason for coming here appears in a letter from William Ellery Channing, published in the Western Messenger here in 1836. He writes: "All of our accounts of the West make me desire to visit it. I desire to see nature under new aspects; but still more to see a new form of society. I hear of the defects of the West, but I learn that a man has self-respect which is not always found in the old communities; that he speaks his mind freely; that he acts from more generous impulses and less selfish calculations. You press me to come and preach to you. I should do it cheerfully if I could. I would rejoice to bear testimony however feeble, to great truths in your new settlements. I confess however, that my education would unfit me for great usefulness among you. I fear the habits, rules and criticisms under which I have grown up and almost grown old have not left me the freedom and courage which are needed in the style of address best suited to the Western people. I have fought against these chains. I have labored to be a free man, but in the state of the ministry and of society

here, freedom is a hard acquisition. I hope the rising generation will gain it more easily and abundantly than their fathers." To escape these "chains," of which Dr. Channing speaks, was no doubt part that was in the minds of these three young men who came. James Freeman Clark came to Louisville. This was the beginning of a long and honored career. Through his church later in Boston, and through his writings, he became one of our first names and is still a household word. His "Ten Great Religions" was about the first attempt to make men familiar with other religions. This was the beginning of the comparative study of religions which now has an established place and commands some of the most critical scholarship of our time. William G. Eliot went to St. Louis, where, through a church of this kind, he had part in shaping things of worth for a whole city as few men have been able to do. The first free public schools there, the philanthropic and remedial agencies of the city took their first form under his guidance. The University of Washington, now the pride of the city, grew up under the leadership of him and men whom he inspired to such service. We are amazed that a small company could do so much. Ephraim Peabody came here. These three men were in religion products of two hundred years of church evolution in America, grounded thoroughly by inheritance in the stern moralities of private and civic

life. They were products of the same section of the country and of the same school for the training of ministers, where religious seekers were encouraged to increase their knowledge as they deepened their spirit. They were friends; held like visions and encouraged each the others in deciding to cast their lots with these cities.

The new settlement was a place in which it was easy for every one to speak his mind. Those who could not be reached by the voice, were reached by the printed page. As every religious sect had its voices, so it had its pens. Almost every religious group had its organ of propaganda, for most of the reading of the people was religious matter and doctrinal discussions. The 30's and the 40's of the last century were full of the "isms" and reforms, which, by many, are thought to have originated in our own time. Emerson's "New England Reformers" enumerates them. The new freedom encouraged literary production and numerous magazines sprang up. We count fifty-seven literary newspapers and magazines which originated here, and were published in Cincinnati, between 1803 and 1860, an average of one a year for over half a century.

This church had its part in these literary and religious ventures. One may find in the Public Library volumes of the Western Messenger which Mr. Peabody began and which was carried on later by James

Freeman Clark and James H. Perkins. Through this magazine the new leaven that was coming from Europe, and which gave rise to the Transcendental Movement in New England, was planted here. We note a poem by Keats, the copy furnished by his brother in Louisville, and a part of his journal, another poem by Oliver Wendell Holmes. Emerson's first poetry was published here in this magazine. German literature and philosophy, just coming into vogue, were translated and reviewed. Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott, and Emerson contributed; and these, with Hawthorne and other New England writers were kept before the people in this new settlement. The Family Magazine which appeared in 1841 was edited by James H. Perkins who served the church in the late 40's. One may find in the Public Library a volume of the Dial, a magazine for literature, philosophy and religion, edited and published by, and for the most part written by, Moncure D. Conway, minister in the 60's.

This church had the first efforts of men who were to fulfill their first promise and go on to good achievement. Ephraim Peabody went later to serve the church in New Bedford and King's Chapel in Boston. A considerable list of his writings remains, and through his children he has lived abundantly in our denominational and our larger national affairs. All will be interested in a little book, "A New England Romance," which appeared in 1920, in which

may be found a record of his life here as the second minister of the church and of conditions here in the 30's. William Henry Channing, the fourth minister, was to become later the successor of Dr. James Martineau in Liverpool, minister of the church in Washington, D. C., and Chaplain of the Senate. As lecturer and orator he taught and moved his generation when issues of great moment were before them. As contributor and biographer he left a considerable body of writing. Among them may be found a two-volume life of James H. Perkins who served the church as supply and minister from 1841 to 1849. Abiel Abbot Livermore, minister from 1850 to 1856, was later the President of Meadville Theological School for twenty-eight years, where he had part in training men for the church and where he contributed much to the scholarship of the New Testament. Moncure D. Conway was to become later a widely known platform advocate and writer both here and in England, where he was minister of the South Place Religious Society in London for twenty-one years. His two-volume "Autobiography, Memories and Experiences," and his, "My Pilgrimage to the Wise Men of the East," tell of his life which was full of works and contacts with men, far beyond the privilege of most. In these may be found a part of the story of this church. Charles William Wendte, minister from 1867 to 1874, was later to render special service to world liberal-

ism as head of our department of foreign relations through which fellowship was established with the liberals of all countries. His reminiscences have just appeared in the Christian Register and his life of Thomas Starr King has been published recently. Those who have not done so will get the whole story of the church in brief compass in, "A History of the First Congregational Church of Cincinnati (Unitarian), by George Augustine Thayer, Pastor Emeritus, published in 1917, copies of which still can be supplied.

In "Heralds of the Liberal Faith," Volume III, "The Preachers," edited by Samuel A. Eliot, may be found biographical sketches of some of the ministers who have served here. Dr. William H. Venable's "The Beginnings of Literary Culture in the Ohio Valley," tells the story of the part this church had in making both the literary and the liberal traditions of the city.

To organizations in the church seeking a year's study of profit and delight, we commend this abundant material. It would give the church new dignity in the minds of those who come after, and give a wholly legitimate, and fully justified, pride in belonging to it today and holding it up to high endeavor. A year's such study would be fruitful not only for knowledge of local history, but also for understanding the processes of thought and change in America

since 1800. The seven years just before us, leading up to the one hundredth anniversary of the church, are fitting years in which to recount these things, "That the generation to come might know them, even the children which should be born, who should arise and tell them to their children."

We read in Ecclesiasticus, "Trust thou not their life, nor respect their multitude, for one that is just is better than a thousand." There are far-reaching results in new states and cities from the presence there at the beginning of a few men. "For by one that hath understanding shall the city be replenished. For there is one that is wise and teacheth many." In those states which had good and able men for their first lawyers and judges, we find the reports of adjudicated cases which are cited in the courts with confidence and listened to with respect. The same first influence may be traced out in schools, hospitals and other city institutions. We supopse that it is true that those who give the very quality of life to a city are scarcely ever known to the multitude. Plato's thought lifted the world out of barbarism, but, he is almost unknown to the man on the street, and is a small figure beside the local politician.

Speaking of a church and of a ministry of sixty-five years, a citizen bears witness that every acre of land in the town has an added value because of

that church and that ministry. We do not know just how all that has been held up here for a century, and lived by a considerable company of people, has effected the price of real estate here, but, we have confidence that the church has had part in lives which, in turn, have had part in making this community mind and its institutions.

What they called a man then is just the same kind of being we call a man today, and the part the church had then, in making this kind of man, we doubt not, remains today almost unchanged. Let us be not overdisturbed by the fashion of our time that is loudly confident that the church has not now, and will never command again, her once exalted place and that what still remains she cannot hold for very long. What was said here confidently one hundred years ago, when this church was forming, and what was quite generally voiced about in the world then, about the rapidly out-going church and incoming better, churchless order, could be carried over bodily, and would express perfectly today the most modern prophet of church decline and disaster among us. The same was said two hundred years ago and five hundred years ago, yet, the church is here, changing with the world about it, and has its part in making those who keep the world wholesome and lift it a little as we go.